

SIGMA

Leadership Series



**Great Leaders
Are Independent**



GREAT LEADERS ARE INDEPENDENT

“ Independence isn't doing your own thing;
it's doing the right thing on your own.

– Kim John Payne

Although teamwork and collaboration are critical skills for modern leadership, leaders are often left to make important decisions and tackle new tasks on their own. For this reason, today's leaders must cultivate a strong sense of independence. High performing leaders can be self-starting and work independently of others when necessary. Leaders who are confident in their own abilities and work alone well may also be perceived by their team as more competent and self-sufficient than those who rely on others to achieve their goals.

Working independently comes with many benefits. For instance, when working alone, people tend to be more creative and productive than when working with others.^{1,2} Without others around to question and reject your thoughts, you are more likely to generate original ideas. Additionally, since independent workers do not need to match other's working pace, they may be able to achieve more on their own.²

In assessing your ability to be independent, ask yourself the following questions:

- Can I identify situations when independent work is better than collaboration?
- Do I feel comfortable working alone?
- How much do I rely on feedback or advice from others to accomplish tasks?
- Is there time in my workday to work independently?
- Have I structured my work environment to facilitate independent work?

Improve Your Independence Skills

Consider the benefits of working alone: Teamwork is a big focus in today's workplaces, but with the emphasis on collaboration, leaders can often forget about the benefits of working alone. Working alone can allow people to focus more deeply, take full responsibility/credit for an end product, experience a greater sense of accomplishment, and develop their own skills (rather than leaning on those of others). The next time you're having difficulty determining whether to work alone or collaboratively, consider whether the task calls for the collaborative efforts of a multiskilled team, or the focused attention of one dedicated individual.

Work alone, then together: Some tasks are best done with a mix of independence and collaboration. For instance, research has demonstrated that brainstorming yields better results when people generate ideas on their own first, then come together to discuss them (rather than having the whole process occur in a group setting).⁴ When you see tasks at work that can be done alone first, then together, suggest this approach to your team. You will save on time spent in meetings and may improve the efficiency and quality of work.

Challenge yourself to work independently: Sometimes what prevents us from feeling comfortable working alone are beliefs about our own limitations. For example, many people assume they are not good at public speaking and habitually delegate presentation opportunities to other members of their team. The best way to test these beliefs about your own limitations is to give more presentations rather than asking others to step in. In this example, if you lack confidence in your public speaking skills, you could sign up for some public speaking courses (e.g., Toastmasters), and agree to attend more invited speaking engagements.

Start Doing These 3 Things Now to Become More Independent:

The following steps can help you strengthen your independence:

1. **Make a back-up plan.** If you find you lack confidence to try new tasks completely on your own, consider using a back-up plan that gives you a reasonable time to try working independently before looking to others for support. For example, set yourself a time limit or deadline for how long you'll work on your own before seeking advice from others. Give yourself sufficient time to make a genuine effort, while still leaving yourself spare time to gain support from others as needed.
2. **Block dedicated time off in your calendar.** Have you ever tried booking a meeting with yourself? Leaders who intend to make progress alone on a project can sometimes end up sidetracked by urgent, unexpected meetings or other demands during the day. One way to protect your own time is to schedule space in your calendar to work distraction-free. If you share your personal calendar with your coworkers, this can be a good way to signal to them that you are busy and should not be interrupted. You may find that you can work more productively once you have blocked the time off in advance.
3. **Work in a private space.** Working in a shared office space can sometimes be distracting, as constant background noise and people stopping by can divert you from your intended work. If you've had this problem before, consider alternatives so you can have a dedicated space to work privately without distraction. Some ideas include renting a desk at a coworking space or working from home a few days a week when you need uninterrupted quiet time to give your attention to an urgent matter. If you have no other option than to work from your office, then try finding ways to physically set boundaries and protect your privacy, like putting up a "do not disturb" sign, plugging in noise cancelling headphones, closing the door of your office, or setting up a temporary foldable screen.

Resources



[Advantages and Disadvantages of Working in Groups](#)



[Sometimes, It's Better to Brainstorm Alone](#)



Develop your independence by taking advantage of SIGMA's coaching services.

Contact SIGMA for coaching on developing your skills as a leader.

SIGMA Assessment Systems, Inc.

Email: support@SigmaHR.com

Call: 800-265-1285

References

¹ Furnham, A., & Yazdanpanahi, T. (1995). Personality differences and group versus individual brainstorming. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 19(1), 73-80.

² Welsh, T. N., Higgins, L., Ray, M., & Weeks, D. J. (2007). Seeing vs. believing: Is believing sufficient to activate the processes of response co-representation? *Human Movement Science*, 26(6), 853-866.

³ Paulus, P. B., Korde, R. M., Dickson, J. J., Carmeli, A., & Cohen-Meitar, R. (2015). Asynchronous brainstorming in an industrial setting: Exploratory studies. *Human Factors: The Journal of the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society*, 57(6), 1076-1094.